

EDITORIALS

NARCOTIC LAWS AND PHYSICIANS

National and state narcotic laws are being enforced with such superlative stupidity that the honest practice of honest scientific medicine by honest, adequately educated physicians is becoming increasingly more hazardous.

Medical opinion is practically unanimous in this conclusion, and what is more important, doctors everywhere are becoming restive under the autocratic rules of tax collectors as to what a doctor may do for his patients. The intelligent element of the voting public is securing some effective but tardy "education," which may in the course of time produce effective results.

Since the decision of the Supreme Court that our chief narcotic law is—as the doctors always have claimed it to be—purely a revenue measure, sane people in all walks of life are waking up to the surprising fact that we are trying to regulate a health problem by money-getting laws administered by money getters for moneyed reasons. People at last are beginning to realize, as one prominent non-medical citizen recently said, that our government is making huge profits out of a vice.

Laws, rules and regulations are now so numerous that an honest, conscientious doctor often must choose between his duty to his patient and the possible consequences of the law. This to such an extent that many doctors refuse to take chances with tax collectors, under-cover agents and what-not, by doing for sick people what scientific medicine endorses as the best treatment. Few doctors can carry in their minds the numerous things laws and painfully numerous bureaucratic regulations require of them every time they give or prescribe a dose of narcotic drugs.

One of the most illuminating analyses and digests we have seen of the Federal narcotic laws has been recently published—with their endorsement—by the Los Angeles County Medical Association. Every doctor ought to have a copy of this 45-page booklet on his desk, and he ought to study it. In order to pay part of the expense of publication, a price of 25 cents is charged, and the book may be obtained from the Los Angeles County Medical Association, 736 South Flower street, Los Angeles.

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DANGEROUS DOLLARS

A well-known wealthy California business man writes:

"About two years ago, my wife wanted a marble-sized cyst removed from the fleshy part of her arm. Our family doctor said that, while it was a simple matter, he thought Doctor X Y Z, a well-known surgeon, could probably do it more skilfully, with a smaller resulting scar. Surgeon X Y Z removed the thing in his office. He deadened the pain with an injection, and we were in his office possibly a half-hour. There was one visit to his office some days later, and we have not seen him since. I was surprised a few days later to receive a bill for \$1000. At

first I thought of contesting the amount, but we decided to pay it and use our influence thereafter to protect our friends against falling into the hands of such a grafter. *We have tangible evidence of our success, which we interpret as a public service.* The greatest consolation we have had out of the experience is that, when explained to our family doctor, he commended our course."

Another successful business man relates his experiences with Doctor A B C, who sent him a bill for \$5000 for a simple uncomplicated operation for removal of the appendix. Another victim writes: "What's getting into you doctors, anyway? You can't all be grafters, but unless you take up and solve some of your problems and, in particular, shear some of the dirty crooks who wear the cloak of your noble calling, it is not difficult to foresee dire consequences."

And so it goes, and not all the complaints by any means come from victims. Decent doctors are as much exercised over the apparently increasing number of medical Ponzi's as are other people.

One of the leading physicians of California writes:

"I have been very much impressed in the last several years by the very high fees which some men in our profession are charging, and I have seen a very goodly number of lay citizens shake their heads at the medical profession. The impression is growing that the reason we all of us don't do this kind of thing is simply because we do not dare. It certainly would be a dreadful state of affairs if the lay public got it into their heads that the medical profession was in one sense a group of 'hold-up artists.'

"Not long ago one of my banker friends told at a dinner party of this experience with a doctor:

"It seems that a wealthy easterner, an elderly man who came West every winter, went down with pneumonia. A well-known doctor was called in, and he in turn called another doctor in consultation. The old gentleman died. The banker was called upon to make arrangements to take the body back East. The illness lasted about two weeks, and the bill for the first doctor was \$15,000 and the bill of the other was \$5000. The banker had been instructed to settle up all debts, and he went to these doctors and they smiled him out of their offices at the mention of a reduction in the fee. He then went back to them with a compromise offer, of something like \$5000 and \$1000. Again he was smiled out of their offices. He then went to a very well-known lawyer and said, 'get these birds,' and I think they settled on the basis of \$500 and \$250, respectively.

"I confess I do not see the way out, but I do believe that a bit of editorial comment from time to time, dealing with the significance of the practice of the art of medicine and its ethical and social obligations, as contrasted to the purely financial considerations and motives, might be of real service in holding some of the younger men, who hear about these expressions of extensive commercialism, along the decent path of proper medical practice.

"Pardon my sending you all this stuff, but I know your deep interest in all things that concern the welfare of the medical profession, and I feel

that you will give the matter thought, and at a suitable time such expression as may seem proper."

Another prominent ethical doctor writes:

"Recently, while visiting in a small California city, Doctor John Doe told me (giving names and dates) that one of his old friends, Mr. Duplex, had been under the care of Doctor Catchem. The only positive findings were three dead teeth, but there was laboratory work done each day and a 'vaccine made from the blood,' and a bill rendered for six weeks' services of \$7500. The doctor told the patient that he was on his way to Europe to lecture before the Royal College of Physicians, and on his return would deliver a series of lectures at the Mayo, etc. He suggested that Mr. Duplex put himself in his care and he would keep him well for \$2500 a year—this meant monthly examinations. He stated that Mr. A paid him a retainer of \$15,000 a year and that Mr. B, the banker, paid him \$10,000 a year, and so on.

"The whole process sounds like the routine of a quack. If it is true it is a very lucrative business. I am curious to know whether this form of 'health insurance' is being carried on in the state of California, and if so if it is ethical. I am not sending this letter in the form of a complaint, but merely to satisfy my curiosity and to relay the information to Dr. John Doe. I am sorry to bother you with the matter, but I thought you would be more interested in it and have information about these doctors."

These are isolated instances of panhandling, to be sure, and we have others much worse than these, but difficult to disguise without destroying the point aimed at and too disgraceful to publish, even were it expedient to do so. When our collection of these depressing narratives gets a little larger, we propose to tabulate them for the information of the profession. It seems that the majority, if not all these commercialists, have certain common and obvious characteristics: They are amazingly ego-centric, pompous, and invariably severely destructive critics of their own organizations and the "moss-covered ethics" that their more worthy colleagues love to honor. The most stupid characteristic of these gentry is that they act as if they thought their well-covered heads also made invisible their slimy coats of muck, whereas their doctor acquaintances know them, and more and more of their patients are finding them out.

Is there a cure for this "cancer" that is getting a hold upon a humanitarian profession? Of course there is, but it may require some fearless surgical work without too much anesthetic. We don't want to wash dirty linen in public, but only the sunshine and breezes of the great open places will remove some odors and bleach certain materials.

"MINERAL WATER" PROPAGANDA

The "playing both ends against the middle" type of mineral water propaganda, now so active, is likely to prove a Frankenstein to some wily promoters. Several of the newer type of press agents, propagandists for pay, publicity brokers or what-not appear simultaneously to have adopted the policy of carrying dignified, restrained advertising in such good medical magazines as they can induce to accept it and, *at the same time* have been running

in the public press the wildest of wildcat propaganda for the particular mineral water they are promoting. That is old as a patent medicine trick, but is only now coming into its own as a method of fooling people about so-called mineral waters.

"Mountain Valley Water" from Hot Springs, Arkansas, for instance, is advertised in a dignified manner in certain scientific literature. But in the public press it is said to be indicated in quantity consumption for "dizziness," "throbbing temples," "headache," "backache," and a lot of other symptoms common to many infirmities. Other waters—many of them—both of the imported and home varieties, make the most ridiculous and untruthful claims, particularly as to "purity" and medicinal virtues.

The exercise of a modicum of intelligence is convincing that *there is no such thing as pure water*. All waters are "mineral waters" in the sense that they contain minerals, usually a mixture of them in small amounts. Distilled water is the nearest approach to "pure water," but even that is not *pure* except when extraordinary methods of distillation are employed.

"Pure spring water" and similar phrases catch the eye and make an appeal to the unwary. All natural water absorbs the soluble matter through which it filters. Excluding extraneous contaminations, practically all water is a diluted solution of such chemicals as it has been in contact with, plus parasites and bacteria. So-called "mineral waters" differ from average river, city, or well water, chiefly in the fact that they have absorbed more chemicals and medicines than has ordinary tap water. Their alleged medicinal and special health values, therefore, depend upon the presence of the same chemicals that can be bought pure or in precisely the same amounts and combination contained in "mineral waters," at any drug store.

The approach now being so actively promoted by many mineral water salesmen is precisely that of the patent medicine vendor who mixes the same chemicals in his "laboratory" and usually puts them in solution in distilled water because this is his safest vehicle, and sells them for fancy prices.

As a matter of fact, many so-called natural mineral waters are made artificially by adding the salts to ordinary water.

There are certain mineral waters promoted only upon a dignified, intelligent, and truthful basis. *The contents of the water are listed*, but *no exaggerated healing claims* are made for the sodium, potassium, and other drugs they contain. Physicians often prescribe such waters, but they do so because the particular drugs the water contains are indicated for the particular patient, because the mineral water is a convenient and palatable method of giving the drugs, and for several other perfectly good reasons.

However, it is growing particularly difficult to distinguish between good and bad in mineral waters, and we are likely to see some interesting public reactions if propaganda continues in the stupid way in which much of it is now being conducted. To medical editors the problem is a hard one. The only safety appears to lie in a policy of accepting advertisements only of those waters of known inno-